Jigsaw

—"I've changed every part of me

Until the puzzle pieces aren't me at all."

Conan Gray - Jigsaw

Dana's apartment had been rented for four years, and in that time it had acquired the particular patina of someone who lived alone and worked too much: clean but not warm, organized but not loved. Est slept there the following week, in the guest room that had never had a guest, on sheets that smelled like the inside of a linen closet because they had lived there, folded and unused, since the lease was signed.

He lay through the night and stared at the ceiling and felt like a patient recovering from surgery he hadn't consented to.

He didn't understand what he had become. How he had let everything slip through his fingers for a love affair. His life seemed like a magnet drawn to all that was bad. The loneliness was killing him. It was tragic—the word wasn't melodramatic, it was accurate, it was the word for what happened when your habits were driving you mad and making you sick and you could see it happening and still couldn't stop because the habits were all you had left.

The apartment came apart in layers.

Like a painting being restored in reverse—the surface stripped first, then the underpainting, then the primer, until all that remained was bare canvas. Kai's absence was the first layer. That had been removed without Est's consent, in the space of twenty-two unconscious hours. The hooks by the door were empty. The closet was half-vacant. The shoes were missing. The apartment had started undressing itself without him.

The second layer was the shared things. All the furniture they had chosen as a couple—the midcentury credenza from that weekend in Hudson, the reading lamp Kai had found at a flea market and bargained for with a charm Est had once found endearing and now understood as performance. The bookshelf they'd built together on a Sunday afternoon, which had taken four hours and almost ended in a fight because Kai couldn't follow instructions and Est couldn't stop following them.

Gone. All of it.

The apartment, stripped of its layers, was almost unrecognizable. The walls showed their true color—a slightly yellowed off-white that had been hidden all this time by furniture and frames. The floors revealed scuff marks that told their own mute history: the drag of the couch, the scrape of table legs, a small divot near the bedroom door where something heavy had been dropped. He didn't remember

what. The floor remembered, and he didn't, and that felt like the whole relationship in miniature.

The narrative took shape without him.

That was how narratives worked now. They didn't require your participation, your side of the story, your carefully worded statement. They just needed absence—the gap, the silence, the locked padlock icon—and they filled themselves. The story, as the internet told it, was simple: Est Sangaworawong, supermodel, had chosen his career over his boyfriend.

The fan accounts—Kai's fan accounts, which were louder and more numerous because Kai had always been better at performing accessibility—told a version that was almost operatic. Kai, the devoted boyfriend, had supported Est through years of grueling work, had waited patiently while Est chased bigger campaigns and more prestigious bookings. And when Kai had finally needed warmth, Est had chosen to leave the country.

Est didn't even know how they knew. He only knew that everyone already knew—that he was planning to go, that the company, in search of a new audience and new numbers and more money, had accepted it, happy to sell him to a market that would fill their pockets. The machinery didn't care about the story. It cared about the margin.

Est read none of it.

Dana read all of it.

She showed him once, holding up her phone with the expression of a doctor showing an X-ray. "You should know what's out there."

He glanced at the screen. Scrolled for three seconds. The thumbnails blurred—Kai's face, Est's face, screenshots of old Instagram posts dissected for evidence of emotional unavailability.

"Okay."

"Do you want to respond?"

"No."

"Est—"

"What would I say?" He looked at her. His voice was even, but the stillness in it was the stillness of a lake after a storm. Exhausted. "That he cheated? That I walked in on him in our hotel bed with his manager? That the whole time I was working fourteen-hour days and letting men put their hands on me because I was saving for a house for us, he was—"

He stopped. His jaw tightened.

"I'm not doing that. I'm not performing my pain for an audience. He can have the narrative. He can be the victim."

Dana put the phone down. She didn't argue. She knew—the way she always knew—that this wasn't stubbornness. It was principle. The last one he had left.

The architecture was visible now.

Kai—who had fucked his manager in their shared hotel bed while Est was standing in front of a camera for fourteen hours—Kai was the sympathetic one. Because this was the pattern. This was the architecture of his entire life, and he could see it now, the way you could see the blueprint of a building after the walls came down.

His parents, who had rewritten his independence as evidence he didn't need them, when the truth was he had needed them desperately and had simply stopped asking. Who had looked at a child who had learned to feed himself and do his own laundry and navigate public transportation alone and concluded, not that they had failed, but that he was fine. That he was the kind of child who didn't require parenting—as if such children existed, as if self-sufficiency at twelve was a personality trait and not a survival mechanism.

Kai, who had rewritten Est's devotion as coldness. Who had taken Est's willingness to endure anything—the long hours, the invasive hands, the slow erosion of his boundaries, job after job after job—and called it workaholism. When every hour in front of a camera was an hour spent building something for them. Every paycheck deposited into the savings account labeled, simply, house.

The same trick. The same inversion. You take a person's love and you rename it. You call devotion distance. You call endurance obsession. You call the thing they're doing for you the reason they're not doing enough.

You were too much, all the time.

A sentence designed to make Est the author of his own abandonment. He saw it now—the way he had been trained, from childhood, to accept responsibility for other people's inability to love him. His parents couldn't be present? Est didn't need them. Kai couldn't be faithful? Est was too cold.

The arrow always pointed the same direction.

Toward Est. Always toward Est.

The final jobs were a kind of exorcism.

He did them all. The editorial committed to months ago—high fashion, severe lighting, the kind of shoot where the creative director spoke in metaphors no one understood but everyone nodded at. The commercial for a skincare brand whose products he didn't use. The print ad for a cologne that smelled like nothing—or rather, like the idea of something: masculinity, desire, a boardroom with a view. Abstraction in a bottle.

He completed each with the grim professionalism of a soldier finishing a tour. He showed up on time. He hit his marks. He gave them the jaw and the eyes and the specific, practiced angle of his head that made the light find the hollows of his cheekbones. And when they said Beautiful, Est, he said Thank you, and when their hands found reasons to touch him—adjusting a collar, smoothing a lapel, the palm on his lower back that lingered one beat too long—he did not flinch.

But he noticed.

He noticed everything, except now the noticing was different.

Before, he had cataloged the violations and filed them away—the hand on his back, the comment about his body, the way certain photographers looked at him when the camera was down, as if he were something to be consumed rather than collaborated with. He'd seen all of it and said nothing, because every job was a brick, and the bricks were building a house, and the house justified everything. The house was the reason. The house was the excuse. The house made it okay to stand still while someone's hand traveled an inch lower than professional.

But the house was gone. Kai had never believed in it, or had been building a different house the whole time with his manager's body and Est's money.

And without it, the things he'd tolerated were no longer necessary costs. They were just violations.

Small ones. The kind the industry called networking or the way things are. So normalized they'd become invisible, like the hum of a refrigerator—you stopped hearing it until someone turned it off, and then the silence was deafening.

He heard the silence now.

The goodbye was at a small bar in the East Village—dim lighting, leather booths, no sign outside. The kind of place you had to know about to find, and the kind of place that liked it that way.

Twenty people. University friends who'd survived the post-graduation attrition—the slow, painless drift that sorted people into the ones who stayed and the ones who

became names you recognized on social media but would never call. Fellow models who understood the loneliness of being looked at for a living, who knew what it meant to be in a room full of people and feel completely unseen because seen and looked at were not the same thing and never had been. A photographer he respected—one of the few who asked before touching. A stylist who had always treated him like a person. A magazine editor who had once written about Est's "capacity for stillness" and had, with that single phrase, made him feel more seen than three years of Kai's supposed love ever had.

No one mentioned Kai.

That was the kindness—the unspoken agreement that tonight was about what Est was moving toward, not what he was leaving behind. The conversations were gentle. Funny, sometimes. Full of the particular tenderness people showed when they knew they were saying goodbye to someone they might not see again for a long time.

Milo arrived late.

He came through the door in a rush of cold air, coat half-buttoned, tote bag sagging with the weight of whatever Milo carried in tote bags—Est imagined books and contact sheets and a water bottle that was never full enough. His face, when he found Est across the room, broke open with something so raw and unguarded that Est had to look away to absorb it.

Because it was gratitude. Unmistakable, unperformed. The gratitude of a twenty-year-old given a chance he hadn't earned by a person he hadn't known long enough to deserve it from.

"You didn't have to do any of this," Milo said. He was standing in front of Est with the slightly overwhelmed expression of someone who had prepared a speech and was now abandoning it. "The contacts. The recommendations. You barely knew me. No one does that. In this industry—" He shook his head. "No one just gives you things."

No, Est thought. They take. They touch. They tell you you have something rare and then they put a price on it.

"You're good at this, Milo. You're going to book work. And you're going to be in rooms with people who will try to make you feel like you owe them something."

He paused. Looked at Milo with the full weight of six years of absorbing the industry's cruelty—its hands and its comments and its Beautiful, Est and its casual, systemic entitlement to the bodies it profited from.

"Don't let them touch you."

The words landed. He could see them land—the way Milo's face shifted from

gratitude to something more serious, more alert, the expression of a young person receiving information they knew was important even if they didn't fully understand it yet.

"If it happens once and you stay silent, they won't stop."

"I won't be silent." Milo said.

Est looked at him. Twenty years old. The whole industry ahead of him—its beauty and its cruelty, its cameras and its hands, its capacity to make you feel extraordinary and worthless in the same afternoon.

"Good."

The morning was blue.

A New York autumn blue, sharp and clean, so clear you could cut yourself on it. The kind of sky that made the city look like a photograph of itself—every edge precise, every building outlined against the blue as if someone had drawn it there with a fine-tipped pen.

He and Dana stood in the empty apartment one last time. Not Est's apartment—Dana's. The apartment she had rented for four years, the apartment that had held her life in this country: the late-night phone calls with her daughters, the early-morning logistics, the particular loneliness of a woman who had crossed an ocean for work and had paid for it with the years she couldn't get back. It held memories, but they were tainted memories—memories that reminded her how, because of work, she couldn't see her daughters grow. Couldn't watch Emma's gestures get wider or Lily's words get more careful. Couldn't be there for the ordinary things, the breakfast things, the things that didn't seem important until they were gone.

The apartment was empty now. Just walls and floors and the ghost-marks where furniture had been.

Est did not feel sad. He felt finished. The way a book felt finished—not happy, not tragic, just complete. The last page turned. The cover closed.

Dana was waiting by the door. She was radiant—her hair freshly trimmed, her face lit from within by something Est had never seen on it before. The specific, almost desperate joy of a woman who was finally going home to her family.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Ready."

They walked out. Est pulled the door closed behind him. The click of the latch was

small and final—a period at the end of a sentence, marking the boundary between the life that was no longer his and the life that hadn't started yet.

He did not look back.

The drive to the airport was quick and quiet, comfortable, and full of hope. The kind of silence that didn't need filling because it was already full—full of the future, full of the leaving, full of the particular peace that came from a decision fully made.

The plane descended through cloud cover the color of old milk, and then—suddenly, the way Thailand did everything—the clouds broke and the land appeared.

Rivers threading through concrete. Temples catching the afternoon light like cupped palms holding gold. Traffic visible even from altitude, a slow-moving system of red and white lights through streets that had no logic but somehow worked—the way Bangkok itself had no logic but somehow worked, had always worked, had been working for centuries before anyone tried to impose a grid on it and would keep working long after the grid failed.

Est pressed his forehead against the window.

He hadn't expected the feeling.

He'd prepared for logistics—customs, baggage claim, the heat. He'd prepared for the sensory assault Bangkok always delivered: the noise and the smell and the color and the everything, all of it arriving at once, without warning or mercy, because Bangkok didn't believe in gradual introductions. It believed in immersion.

He had not prepared for the tenderness.

It arrived through the body, not the mind. A loosening in his shoulders. A softening behind his sternum. The relaxation of a person who had been holding a particular shape for so long he'd forgotten he was holding it, forgotten that muscles could do things other than clench, forgotten that his jaw could unset and his spine could curve and his hands could rest without gripping.

He was looking at the country where his grandmother had fed him rice and told him he was too thin, and his body remembered before his mind did. The body was always first. The body knew things the mind was still arguing about, still analyzing, still running through its endless, exhausting taxonomy of feelings and causes and appropriate responses. The body just knew. And what it knew, pressing against the airplane window at thirty thousand feet descending, was: here. This. This is where you can put it down.

Dana was asleep beside him, head tilted at an angle that would cost her three days of neck complaints. Her phone was still clutched in her hand—the manager's grip,

unrelenting even in sleep. The camel coat was folded in her lap like a sleeping animal.

The captain announced their descent in Thai first, then English.

The Thai washed over Est like water—familiar, musical, a language his mouth knew better than his mind. He hadn't spoken it regularly in years. With his parents, conversations had defaulted to English—their choice, not his, because English was the language of the country they had moved him to, and they had made the transition so completely that Thai became the language of grandmothers and holidays, relegated to the margins of his life like a dialect you loved but couldn't use.

With Kai, it had always been English. Everything with Kai had been in English—the love, the fights, the lies, the sentence you were too much. He wondered, briefly, if it would have been different in Thai. If Thai—with its particles of politeness, its five tones that could change the meaning of a word with the slightest shift in pitch—would have made Kai kinder. Or if cruelty was cruelty in any language, and the only thing that changed was the melody.

Home.

The word did more work than four letters should.

Through the automatic doors, the wall of heat.

Bangkok heat—not dry or comprehensible the way desert heat was comprehensible, not the polite warmth of a European summer. This heat was weighted, textured, wrapping around him with the insistence of someone very glad to see him. A relative who hugged too hard and held on too long and you couldn't bring yourself to pull away because the hug, despite its excess, was genuine.

The air was thick with moisture and exhaust and the faint undercurrent of jasmine or frangipani, blooming relentlessly in every margin of concrete, every crack in every sidewalk, every forgotten pot on every balcony. Indifferent to pollution. Indifferent to traffic and noise and the ten million lives pressing against each other in this improbable, impossible, magnificent city. Just blooming, because that was what it did.

Est breathed it in.

He wasn't looking for anyone. His plan was a taxi to the new apartment, unload, sleep. Simple. Logistical. The kind of plan he could execute without feeling.

He turned.

David stood at the front of the crowd—tall, broad-shouldered, with the calm, steady presence of a man who had been holding things together for four years without complaint and was now, finally, getting his wife back. He was holding a hand-painted sign with slightly uneven letters:

WELCOME HOME, MOM!

Behind him, flanking him like mismatched bookends, were the twins.

They were holding a second sign.

WELCOME, P'EST!

The letters were careful, ruler-straight. Gold stars in the corners. The kind of detail someone added when they were trying to make something special but didn't quite know how, so they added stars, because everyone agreed on stars. Stars were universally accepted as festive. Stars could not be wrong.

Est stared at it.

His throat did something involuntary.

Dana was already moving. She'd abandoned her cart—the first time in four years Est had seen her abandon anything—and was walking, then half-running, toward her family. The camel coat was still on the luggage. Her bag was still on her shoulder. She didn't care. She was done being careful.

"MOM!"

The word erupted from both twins at once—English, not Thai, the language of their childhood, the language that meant this is the person I've been waiting for. They dropped the sign—both ends, the paper folding on the tile floor—and ran.

The collision was graceless and perfect. Dana caught them both, her arms wide and desperate enough to hold two twelve-year-olds who were taller than she expected and thinner than she remembered and here, finally here, not on a screen, not a voice through a phone speaker, but solid and warm and smelling like the shampoo she hadn't bought them.

She was crying. She didn't try to hide it.

David stood back, watching. His expression was the expression of a man who understood that this moment belonged to someone else and was content to wait. He'd been waiting four years. He could wait thirty more seconds.

Then he stepped forward, and Dana reached for him, and the family closed around itself like a fist.

Est watched from a distance. He did not intrude.

David turned to him after a moment. Extended a warm handshake—firm, direct, the handshake of a man who said what he meant and meant what he said.

"Good to see you, Est. How was the flight?"

"Long."

"They always are."

Est received both hugs from the twins—Emma's enthusiastic, a full-body collision; Lily's careful, a precise squeeze at the ribs—and thought: It's been a long time since I've heard so much Thai.

Not transactional Thai. Not the Thai of customs agents and taxi drivers and restaurant orders. Familiar Thai. The Thai of P'Est, khun bpen yang ngai? and Maa laew! and the cascade of particles—ka, kha, na, noi—that softened everything, made everything gentle, turned even mundane sentences into small acts of care.

The P' that meant older brother but also meant you're part of us—respect and affection and belonging all condensed into a single syllable that English couldn't quite capture. English had no equivalent. English had Mr. and sir and first names and last names, and none of them did what P' did, which was to say: you are older than me, and I respect you, and you are mine.

Dana watched her daughters with the expression of someone memorizing every detail—Emma's wide gestures, Lily's careful word choices, the way they both leaned toward their mother without noticing, like plants turning toward light. Phototropism. Involuntary. The body knowing before the mind.

Est recognized this. It was what he did—the noticing, the providing, the silent attention. The way he'd watched Kai and cataloged his moods and adjusted himself accordingly, a human thermostat constantly recalibrating to keep the room at the right temperature.

Seeing it in someone else was like catching his reflection in an unexpected mirror. The same instinct. The same devotion. The same willingness to notice everything and say nothing—except Dana's noticing had been rewarded with daughters who packed her bag and made her breakfast, and Est's noticing had been rewarded with a man who fucked his manager in their bed.

The difference wasn't the noticing. It was who you noticed for.

David drove. A white pickup truck, large and practical, the vehicle of a man who built things. The twins sat in the back with Est, bracketing him, and talked—or rather, Emma talked and Lily annotated, the way they always did, a conversational system so practiced it was almost choreographic.

"P'Est, do you like Thai food? Real Thai food, not the American kind. Because American Thai food is—"

"Emma."

"What? It's true. The pad thai there is—"

"Different," Lily supplied. "The pad thai there is different."

"It's wrong."

"It's adapted for a different palate."

"It's wrong, Lily."

Est listened. He absorbed the rhythm—the rising and falling of their voices, the way Thai and English wove through their sentences like two threads in the same fabric, neither dominant, both necessary. It was how he used to speak, before English swallowed everything. Before he let it.

The apartment building was modern. Glass and concrete, twelve stories. The kind of building that had appeared in Bangkok's skyline over the last decade—sleek, anonymous, designed for the specific demographic of young professionals and expatriates who wanted proximity to the city without the city's chaos. A lobby with marble floors. A concierge who wai'd when they entered. An elevator that smelled like lemongrass.

The apartment itself was on the ninth floor, and it was better than the photos.

The ceiling was higher than expected—a small thing that made a large difference, the way height always did. It was the difference between a room that held you and a room that let you breathe. The floors were pale wood—real wood, he could tell by the grain, by the slight variation in color from plank to plank, the imperfections that proved authenticity. An open layout: the entrance opening into a dining area that flowed into a kitchen with stone countertops the color of fog. A step down to a sunken living area, empty now but shaped for comfort, designed for a person who wanted to sink into their life rather than perch on the edge of it.

A bedroom, spacious and empty. Waiting.

And the window.

Floor to ceiling. A wall of glass looking out over residential Bangkok—mid-rise buildings and rooftop gardens and laundry hanging from balconies and distant highways, the lights stretching to the horizon like a circuit board laid flat. The city didn't end. It just became haze, and the haze became sky, and the sky—in the late

afternoon—was the color of a bruise healing.

"P'Est?" Emma stood at the threshold, her voice carrying the careful hope of a child who wanted to have chosen correctly. "Do you like it?"

"I like it."

She beamed. David had mentioned in the truck—casually, as if it were nothing—that the girls had insisted on seeing the listing photos and had voted for this one. Because it has the best light, Dad. P'Est needs good light. They didn't know why P'Est needed good light. They just knew he worked with cameras, and cameras needed light, and therefore the apartment with the biggest window was the obvious choice. The logic was twelve-year-old logic—simple, direct, irrefutable.

"We picked it," Lily said. Quiet. Factual. The way she said everything. "Emma found it. I confirmed the square footage."

"You confirmed the square footage."

"Yes. I wanted to make sure it was accurate. Listings sometimes exaggerate."

Est looked at her. Twelve years old and verifying square footage. He felt something he couldn't name—something between amusement and admiration and the specific, sharp ache of recognizing yourself in someone else's child.

The goodbye happened in the lobby. Quick but warm.

David's handshake—the same firm grip, the same direct eye contact, the unspoken message: You're welcome here. You're part of this.

Dana's squeeze on his arm. "Sleep," she said. An instruction, not a suggestion. The manager's voice, softened by exhaustion and joy.

The twins standing side by side—different hair, same face, same dark eyes that missed nothing and said everything.

The truck pulled away. The twins waved from the back window—Emma's wave full-armed, a semaphore of enthusiasm; Lily's a flutter of fingers, precise and contained—and then they were gone, and the street was just a street, and Est was just a man standing alone in a building he didn't know.

Although he planned to sleep upon arrival, he didn't sleep.

He began unpacking instead, because the body wanted to move and the mind wanted to organize, and when both agreed, you obeyed. He unpacked all his clothes

—the pieces that had survived the curation, the garments he'd deemed worth transporting across an ocean. Boxes labeled in his own handwriting, neat and square: BEDROOM. BATHROOM. KITCHEN. FRAGRANCE. Everything he had sent from the old apartment, the apartment that was no longer his, that was now just a space with scuff marks and yellowed walls and the ghost-shape of furniture that had been chosen by two people who no longer existed as a unit.

He put sheets on the bed—the only piece of furniture in the apartment besides what was already built in. The wardrobes with their sliding doors. The kitchen cabinets, empty and clean. The bathroom shelves, bare and waiting.

He spent four hours organizing his closet.

Four hours. The kind of time investment that would seem absurd to anyone who didn't understand what closets meant to Est—the taxonomy, the order, the specific comfort of knowing exactly where everything was. The cashmere on the left. The cotton in the middle. The silk on the right. Arranged by weight, by season, by color within each category, a gradient from light to dark that pleased something deep in his brain, something that needed the world to make visual sense even when nothing else did.

Half the closet was empty.

He looked at the empty half. In New York, the empty half had been Kai's—or rather, had been the space Est had left for Kai, the space that said you belong here too, there is room for you in my life, I have made room. Now the empty half was just empty. No one to leave space for. No one's things to accommodate. No one's preferences to orbit.

He thought about filling it. Not with someone else's clothes—with his own. Summer clothes for the weather in Thailand. Linens and cottons and the lightweight fabrics he'd never been able to wear in New York's winters, the colors he'd avoided because Kai preferred him in neutrals and Est had, without noticing, stopped wearing blue.

He would fill the whole closet. Both sides. He would take up all the space.

He stopped. Walked to the enormous window. Slid it open.

The balcony was real space—not the ornamental ledge that New York apartments called a balcony, barely wide enough to stand on, an architectural gesture that said outdoor space without delivering it. This was room to stand, to lean, to breathe. Room for a chair. Room for plants. Room for a person to exist outside the walls of their apartment without having to leave the building.

The railing was cool under his palms, and beyond it the city unfolded—an infinite glittering sprawl that dissolved into haze, sky and city blurring at the margins the way watercolors bled when the paper was wet. Bangkok at night was not New York

at night. New York was vertical—the lights stacked, climbing, competitive, each building trying to outshine the one beside it. Bangkok was horizontal. The lights spread. They sprawled. They scattered across the flat plain of the city like someone had dropped a jar of fireflies and decided to leave them where they fell.

Bangkok's noise was not New York's noise either. New York's noise was mechanical—sirens and horns and the grinding of the subway beneath the street, the aggressive, metallic soundtrack of a city that never stopped working. Bangkok's noise was human. The bright, rising laughter of someone having a good night. The clatter of a street vendor's cart. The distant throb of music from a rooftop bar. The bark of a dog that no one owned but everyone fed. It was noise that had people in it, and the people were not in a hurry, and the not-hurrying made everything sound different—slower, warmer, less like a machine and more like a conversation.

He stood on the balcony and thought about cigarettes.

He'd been smoking since he was twenty-one—casually at first, then consistently, the way you became consistent with anything that offered a small, reliable relief. But he had stopped because Kai hated the smell. Not stopped stopped—he'd never stopped completely. He'd only stopped in Kai's presence. He smoked at parties where Kai left him alone, nursing his solitude in a corner with a cigarette and a glass of something clear. In the back of bars, when he asked for a moment to breathe and no one questioned it because Est was always asking for moments to breathe. During breaks from endless shoots—the fifteen-minute intervals where he was technically free and used the freedom to stand outside and inhale something that was at least his choice, his poison, his private decision.

He had smoked the way he did everything Kai disapproved of: furtively, guiltily, with the shame of a person taught that his authentic impulses were problems to be managed. Desires to be hidden. Needs to be minimized until they fit inside the acceptable boundaries of someone else's comfort.

Kai had said he was too much.

Kai had hidden a man in their bed.

They had both been hiding. The difference was that Est had hidden pieces of himself to make the relationship work, and Kai had hidden a person to make the relationship irrelevant.

The balcony looked out at the city, and the city looked back, and it did not ask Est to be less than he was. It did not require him to shrink. It did not tell him his impulses were problems or his needs were excessive or his authentic self was an inconvenience to be managed. It just sprawled there, vast and indifferent and alive, and said: Here. Stand here. Be whatever you are. I've seen everything.

He did his skincare routine. Brushed his teeth. Put on pajamas—soft cotton, the

good kind, the kind he'd splurged on because his skin was his livelihood and he'd learned to treat it accordingly. He lay down on the bed in the empty room.

It felt more like his own than any room he'd slept in since he couldn't remember when.

The sheets smelled like his favorite laundry detergent—clean and faintly botanical, a smell that belonged exclusively to him because Kai had used a different brand and the old apartment had always smelled like a compromise, a blend of two preferences that satisfied neither. This was just his. Just the smell of his own clean sheets in his own empty room in his own new life.

That was enough.

He felt melancholic.

Not sad—he was precise about his emotions, the way he was precise about everything. Precision was not coldness; it was care. Sadness was sharp, attached to a cause. You were sad about something—a loss, a failure, a specific wound. Melancholy was ambient. The emotional equivalent of Bangkok's haze—present everywhere, belonging nowhere, impossible to locate or eliminate because it wasn't coming from a single source. It was atmospheric.

He was melancholic because the day had been full of warmth he hadn't earned. Dana's family. The twins' sign. The hugs—Emma's full-body, Lily's precise. The P'Est, welcome. The white truck and the conversation about pad thai and the twelve-year-old who verified square footage. The apartment they'd chosen because P'Est needs good light.

He was melancholic because he didn't know what to do with warmth that was freely given.

He knew what to do with warmth that was earned—you worked for it, posed for it, stood in front of cameras for fourteen hours and let people put their hands on you for it. You endured and performed and delivered, and in return you received compensation that you could call warmth if you squinted.

He knew what to do with warmth that was conditional—you met the conditions. You hid the cigarettes and the exhaustion and the parts of yourself that might violate the terms. You made yourself smaller, smoother, more acceptable. You became the version they wanted, and in return they stayed. Until they didn't.

But warmth that just arrived? That showed up at an airport with gold stars? That sat in the back of a truck and talked at you for thirty minutes about nothing and everything? That offered to feed you without asking for anything in return? That picked your apartment because it had the best light?

He didn't have a protocol for that.

He didn't have a framework. He didn't have a response rehearsed, a posture prepared, a version of himself designed to receive it. He only had the raw, unpracticed, deeply uncomfortable experience of being cared for by people who expected nothing back—and the melancholy of knowing that this should have been normal, that this was what normal looked like, and that he had lived twenty-seven years without recognizing it.

He lay on a mattress, in a room with no curtains, in a city that was still talking outside his window. In a life with no narrative—not yet. Not the internet's, not Kai's, not his parents'. Just the raw, unwritten, terrifying, beautiful blankness of a story that hadn't been told yet because the person it belonged to was still deciding how to begin.

His eyes closed.

Bangkok murmured.

He slept.

The next day was practical

He ordered takeout—pad kra pao from a place around the corner that had no English menu and didn't need one—and spent the hours on his computer, buying furniture with delivery in less than twenty-four hours. A new cabinet for his perfume collection—glass-fronted, climate-controlled, because perfume was not decoration, it was an archive, and archives required care. A headboard, upholstered in a neutral linen that would age well. A sofa for the sunken living area—low-backed, deep-seated, the kind you could disappear into. Balcony furniture that would be sturdy enough to withstand the humidity: teak, not metal, because metal rusted and teak endured and Est was done with things that couldn't endure.

He bought things for the kitchen. This was deliberate—a goal he had in mind, specific and quiet: to make his kitchen his own again. In New York, the kitchen had been Kai's domain. Not because Kai cooked—Kai barely cooked, Kai ordered in and called it efficiency—but because Kai's preferences had colonized the space: the brands, the arrangement, the specific way the mugs were organized that Est would never have chosen but had accepted because acceptance was easier than argument and argument was a form of being too much.

Now he bought his own things. A rice cooker—proper, not decorative, the kind his grandmother had used, the kind that made rice the way rice was supposed to be made. A wok. Knives. A cutting board made of wood, not plastic, because he could feel the difference and the difference mattered. Mixing bowls. A kettle. Appliances

that filled the countertops with the evidence of intention: I am going to live here. I am going to feed myself. I am going to make this space mine.

Even a vacuum cleaner. He bought a vacuum cleaner, and the act of buying it—the mundane, irreducibly domestic act of choosing a vacuum cleaner based on suction power and noise level and cord length—felt more like a declaration of independence than anything he'd done in years.

He spoke on the phone with his aunts. Three calls, one after the other, each following the same pattern: the initial exclamation (Luk! You're here! Finally!), the rapid-fire questions (Have you eaten? Is the apartment nice? Is it safe? Do you have a rice cooker?), and the invitation (Come eat. Come this week. Bring your appetite.).

"I'm adjusting," he said. To each aunt, the same phrase. Not a deflection—a truth. He was adjusting. The word was accurate. Adjustment was not arrival; it was the process between departure and belonging, the recalibration of a life that had been calibrated to a different country, a different industry, a different person's expectations.

The days had a rhythm now. Not the rigid, contract-driven rhythm of New York—alarms at 5 AM, call times at 6, the day divided into billable hours and transit time and the narrow margins between obligations where he tried to feel something other than tired. This rhythm was softer. Self-made. He woke when he woke. He ate when he was hungry. He organized his apartment in the order that pleased him—closet first, then kitchen, then bathroom, then the perfume cabinet, which he assembled himself because the instructions were in Thai and he could read them and the reading felt like a homecoming.

He would take back control of his life.

The sentence formed in his mind without drama. Not a declaration. Not a resolution made on New Year's Eve and abandoned by February. Just a fact. Quiet. True. The way facts were when you finally stopped arguing with them.

Dana would help with work. She'd said so. She'd said it on the phone, on Monday, her voice carrying the particular energy of a woman who had spent three days with her family and was radiating the specific, renewable warmth of a person whose emotional tank was full. You could hear it—the difference between Dana-in-New-York and Dana-in-Bangkok. The same competence, the same sharpness, but underneath it a steadiness that hadn't been there before, a foundation that came from sleeping in a house where someone packed your bag in the morning and someone else made you breakfast.

"I'm handling the logistics. You handle the settling. When you're ready to work, I'll have everything lined up."

She would. He knew she would. Dana's word was architecture—load-bearing, structural, the thing the whole building stood on.

He wasn't ready yet.

He knew he wasn't ready yet. The settling was not finished—not because the apartment was incomplete but because he was incomplete. The perfumes were on the shelf, arranged in their taxonomy of scent families and memories. The jar—the clay one, the one from his grandmother, the one that had survived the move because Est had wrapped it in four layers of bubble wrap and carried it in his hand luggage, refusing to let it out of his sight—was on the nightstand. The lamp was on the desk. The balcony had its furniture. The kitchen had its rice cooker.

But the person who owned these things—the person who had packed them in New York and unpacked them in Bangkok and was now living among them in the tentative, careful manner of a museum visitor walking through an exhibit of his own life—that person was still being assembled. The objects were in place. The person who gave them meaning was not yet complete.

He needed more time.

He took it.

He took it without asking permission, without justifying it, without explaining to anyone why a week of unpacking and cooking and standing on his balcony and speaking Thai to his aunts and buying a vacuum cleaner was necessary. He just took it. And the taking—the simple, unprecedented act of giving himself what he needed without apologizing for needing it—was, in itself, a kind of recovery.

And then the week ended, and it was time.

Monday morning. The text from Dana arrived at 7:15 AM, while Est was on the balcony with his coffee, the jasmine open beside him—he'd bought a jasmine plant on Wednesday, an impulse he hadn't questioned—and the bougainvillea blazing in its corner, magenta against the gray concrete, and the city sprawling below in the flat, white light of early morning.

Dana: Ready for the grand tour? I'll pick you up at 10.

He looked at the text. He looked at the city. He drank his coffee. The coffee was good—Thai coffee, strong and sweet, nothing like the austere pour-overs he'd been drinking in New York because Kai preferred them and Est had, as always, adjusted.

Est: Ready.

He put down the phone. Went inside. Showered. Dressed with care—not the

excessive, armor-building care of a man preparing for battle, but the quiet care of a person who respected himself enough to present himself well. A white shirt, linen, slightly oversized. Dark trousers. Clean shoes. Simple. Not a costume. Not a performance. Just clothes on a body, and the body was his, and the clothes were his choice.

He looked in the mirror.

The jaw. The cheekbones. The dark eyes that saw too much and said too little. The face that had sold watches and fragrances and the illusion of perfection to audiences on three continents. The face the internet was currently dissecting for evidence of emotional unavailability. The face Kai had kissed and photographed and shown to his manager in the hotel bed—had the manager seen it? Had Kai shown him photos? Had he said this is my boyfriend, the beautiful one, the cold one, the one who's always working?

The face in the mirror was selling nothing now. Just itself. And the self it was selling was tired and guarded and beautiful in the specific, slightly melancholic way that beautiful people were beautiful when they stopped trying—when the performance dropped and the bone structure remained and you could see, underneath the architecture of the face, the person who lived there.

Okay, he thought. Let's go.

Dana pulled up at ten exactly. She drove a rented sedan—practical, air-conditioned, the car of a woman who understood that first impressions in Bangkok traffic were made from inside a vehicle and acted accordingly.

"You look better," she said, looking at him as he got in. Not a compliment—an assessment. The manager's eye, evaluating her client the way she always did: quickly, completely, missing nothing.

"So do you."

"I slept for eleven hours last night. Emma made me breakfast. Lily packed my bag."

She said this with the barely contained wonder of a woman who had raised competent children from a distance and was only now discovering the evidence of her success. Four years of parenting through phone screens and care packages and the guilty, desperate love of a mother who had chosen her family's financial security over her physical presence—and the children had grown up anyway. Had grown up well. Had become people who made breakfast and packed bags and verified square footage.

"They're growing up, Est."

"They are."

"I don't know when it happened."

"It happened while you were looking."

She looked at him. The manager look—the one that saw through the linen shirt and the controlled exterior to the person underneath, the person who said things like it happened while you were looking and meant: I see you. I see what you gave up. I see that you're getting it back.

"Ready?" she asked.

"You keep asking me that."

"Because I keep wanting to make sure."

"I'm ready."

The drive took thirty minutes. The driver—a company driver, Dana explained, part of the package—navigated the traffic with the calm competence of a man who had been doing this for decades, who understood that Bangkok traffic was not a problem to be solved but a condition to be accepted, like weather, like gravity, like the fact that the city had been built on a floodplain and would continue to flood every monsoon season regardless of engineering.

Dana sat beside Est and told him about the agency—the logistics, the structure, the landscape of the Thai entertainment industry that Est was about to enter.

"The company is bigger than what we're used to," she said. "Much bigger. It's not just modeling. It's everything—actors, singers, influencers, the whole ecosystem. They even have a radio station in the building."

"A radio station."

"I know. It's a different scale. In New York, you were a model at a modeling agency. Here, you'll be a model at an entertainment conglomerate. The difference matters."

"How?"

"More resources. More exposure. More—" She paused, choosing the word the way she chose everything—deliberately, with the awareness that words were tools and tools should be appropriate to the task. "—cross-pollination. You won't just be working with fashion people. You'll be in a building with musicians and actors and content creators. The energy is different."

Est processed this. Cross-pollination. The metaphor was botanical—appropriate,

given the jasmine on his balcony—and it suggested growth, interaction, the mingling of different creative species in a shared ecosystem. It also suggested complexity. More people. More energies. More emotions to absorb, more faces to read, more rooms to navigate with the sponge-heart fully open and the headphones always within reach.

More hands, potentially. More comments. More people who would look at his face and feel entitled to touch it.

"I'll manage," he said.

"I know you will."

The building appeared through the windshield like a declaration.

It was gigantic—a skyscraper, glass and steel, with tall windows that caught the morning light and threw it back at the city. The kind of building that made a statement, and the statement was: We are serious. We are large. We have thirty floors and we use all of them. It gleamed with the particular sheen of new money invested wisely—not ostentatious but undeniable, the architectural equivalent of a person who didn't need to raise their voice because everyone was already listening.

The lobby was vast. Marble floors, high ceilings, the subtle hum of central air conditioning fighting Bangkok's heat and winning. Screens on the walls showing the faces of the company's talent—singers, actors, models, presenters—a rotating gallery of beautiful people doing beautiful things. Est's face was not among them. Not yet.

People moved through the space with purpose—young, mostly, dressed in the specific Bangkok style that combined fashion-forwardness with an indifference to Western rules. Sneakers with suits. Bold prints with minimal accessories. The kind of choices that would have raised eyebrows in New York and here were simply how things were done.

Est observed it all. He absorbed it—the faces, the energy, the specific emotional frequency of a building full of creative people doing creative work. The sponge-heart filled.

Not painfully—not yet, not the way it filled in New York, where the saturation had been constant and overwhelming and had driven him to the headphones and the forty-eight-hour disappearances and the locked-door solitude of a person who needed to wring out the sponge before it burst. Here the filling was different. Gentler. The energy in the building was not the aggressive, competitive energy of the New York fashion industry—the constant undercurrent of comparison and ranking and the unspoken hierarchy of who was booking and who was not. It was something warmer, something more communal. The energy of a culture that valued sanuk—fun, enjoyment, the principle that work should contain pleasure and

pleasure should contain work—as a professional philosophy and not just a personal one.

People smiled at him in the elevator. Not the tight, assessing smile of industry people evaluating a potential competitor—a real smile, the kind that reached the eyes and expected nothing in return.

He could work here.

The thought arrived simply, without fanfare. Not a revelation. Not an epiphany. Just a quiet, certain knowing—the way you knew a room was the right temperature, the way you knew a chair was comfortable, the way you knew, sometimes, that you were in the right place, not because anything dramatic had happened but because nothing in your body was resisting.

He could work here. He could be here. He could build something new in this building, in this city, in this country that smelled like jasmine and exhaust and the specific, irreplaceable scent of a place that had known him before he knew himself.

Dana was watching him. She always watched—it was her job, her gift, her way of knowing.

Est looked at the building. The light through the tall windows. The people moving through the lobby with their purpose and their sneakers and their smiles.